

# Mighty Aphrodite? The Knidian Aphrodite and the ‘female nude’

Michael Squire

The ‘Knidian Aphrodite’ – a marble statue sculpted by Praxiteles around 360 B.C., and installed on the promontory of Knidos (on the south-west coast of modern-day Turkey) – was celebrated in antiquity for stripping down its female sculptural subject. But what does this statue embody? How should we explain its origins? And why did Praxiteles choose to portray the goddess without clothes? Exploring these questions, Michael Squire demonstrates how the Knidian Aphrodite wasn’t quite the ‘female nude’ as we know it. After all, he explains, viewers were looking upon not just an unclothed female body, but also a naked divinity.

Like all the most celebrated sculptures of antiquity, Praxiteles’ original statue is lost. It was likely removed to Constantinople in the late 300s A.D. – where it seems to have been destroyed in a fire during the late fifth century. We nonetheless know of the image through numerous literary and archaeological sources. Ancient Greek and Latin texts provide over 100 literary references. In one of the most detailed discussions, the Elder Pliny (writing in the 70s A.D.) tells how Praxiteles originally made two different marble statues of Aphrodite, offering them to the inhabitants of Kos and Knidos respectively. The Koans had first dibs – and opted for a statue ‘with draped appearance’, Pliny tells us, ‘thinking this the chaste and proper’ thing to do. Meanwhile, the Knidians took charge of the statue that the Koans had rejected. As Pliny confirms, they nonetheless ended up with the better deal, acquiring an artwork which ‘many people have sailed to Knidos to see’: ‘for it was Praxiteles who made Knidos famous, thanks to this statue’ (*Natural History* 36.20–21).

## Reconstructing the Knidian Aphrodite

As Pliny’s story makes clear, the Knidian Aphrodite became subject to all manner of legends. But what did Praxiteles’ actual statue actually look like? Two copies – one in the Vatican, the other in Munich – give two tentative first impressions: Aphrodite

stands in so-called *contrapposto* pose (with her right leg supporting the weight and the left foot raised, throwing the body into a diagonal dance). To the right we see a water-jar, which provides a narrative context for the figure’s nudity: Aphrodite is naked because she is preparing for a bath. In her left hand, the goddess clutches her drapery – in turn underlining the fact that we see the goddess *without* clothes. The right arm proves somewhat more ambiguous: if the positioning of the hand obscures a frontal view of the groin, it also draws viewers in – pointing them to precisely where Aphrodite’s embodied divinity lies...

By the time these two copies were made (probably in the first century A.D.), Praxiteles’ statue had spurred a whole sisterhood of sculptural adaptations. Sometimes, the position of Aphrodite’s feet and hands was reversed (as with the so-called ‘Capitoline Venus’ type). Other statues imagine the divine subject in different but related pose: she was shown as a crouching figure, for example, or else as a semi-naked goddess (as in the famous ‘Venus de Milo’).

Despite extensive archaeological excavations, the context of Praxiteles’ original statue at Knidos remains debated. We know that the image was the centre-piece of a cult to Aphrodite Euploia (‘Aphrodite of the Fair Voyage’). But quite how the statue was displayed is less clear. Pliny himself talks about an ‘open’ space, in which ‘the effigy of the goddess can be

seen from all sides’. Although we cannot ratify such claims, there can be little doubt that the statue was designed for seeing in the round: it catered to a variety of viewing positions, with viewers perambulating the statue so as to look at it from different angles.

## Wo-manufacture

But what of the motif of nudity itself: how does this fit within the history of Greek sculpture? The Knidian Aphrodite can in one sense be seen as the culmination of a developing trend in sculpting the female body between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. In Archaic sculpture, we find a clear-cut distinction between statues of male and female subjects: where sculpted male youths (so-called *kouroi*) are naked, statues of women (*korai*) dressed up their subjects – embellishing their clothes with sculpted and painted patterns. If sixth-century sculptors covered up the female body, they delighted in suggesting the bodily contours that they disguised. Indeed, the history of the sculpted female body in the fifth and early fourth centuries might be told as a sort of ‘striptease’, with artists turning to ever more suggestive and transparent forms of drapery. We might think, for example, of the diaphanous clothing, clinging and swirling around the goddesses on the east pediment of the Parthenon; observe, too, the see-through drapery enveloping the sea-nymphs of the Xanthos ‘Nereid Tomb’.

The Knidian Aphrodite took the decisive step in dispensing with drapery altogether. No less importantly, Praxiteles’ image constructed a particular ideal of female beauty. Although classical art is so often championed for its ‘naturalistic’ or ‘true-to-life’ aspects, it hardly needs saying that this is not what the female body ‘really’ looks like. Among other features, note the lack of sculpted genitals or pubic hair: not for nothing is the best-selling brand of female razor marketed under the name ‘Venus’!

Over the last 2000 years, Praxiteles’

Aphrodite has re-appeared in all manner of different guises. Among the most famous is Botticelli's painted *Birth of Venus* in the late fifteenth-century, in which Aphrodite's emergence from the foam heralds the 're-birth' of classical models in the Italian Renaissance. Bound up with this afterlife is also a legacy of assumed relations between viewed female object and male viewing subject – the formation, as one scholar termed it, of western art history's enduring 'male gaze'. The term was coined by John Berger in the early 1970s, and refers to the way in which western art at once figures and reinforces cultural distinctions of gender: 'men act and women appear', as Berger writes; where 'men look at women', 'women watch themselves being looked at.'

Praxiteles' statue of the Knidian Aphrodite certainly lends itself to such 'male-gaze' interpretations. What we see here is a defining moment in the objectification of the female body: not only does Aphrodite present herself for male inspection, she is even shown preparing herself to be looked at (hence the statue's 'bathing' narrative context). One might go further, drawing a direct line of influence from ancient classical art to 'page-3' girls, contemporary pornography, even anorexia and Body Dysmorphia Disorder (that is, the problem of living up to fabricated cultural 'ideals' of the female body...). In all this, the legacy of the Knidian Aphrodite is decidedly problematic: it not only renders the female body as eroticized object, but in doing so also enslaves and disempowers its subject.

### Look, if you dare!

It's easy to see how this 'male gaze' relates to a longer history of gendered viewing in the ancient world. Think, for example, of the Judgment of Paris – a forerunner of the modern-day beauty contest, in which Paris was asked to decide whether Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite was the 'most beautiful', and with disastrous consequences... Alternatively, we might remember the story of Pygmalion – the Cretan sculptor-regent who became so enamoured with his female sculpture as to urge Venus to transform 'it' into a 'she' (for the story, see the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written in the early first century A.D.).

There can be no denying the statue's importance within the whole gendered history of western art. But what all too easily gets missed out of our history are issues of religion. After all, Praxiteles' image was not crafted as a 'female nude' in the modern sense. Rather, it was an attempt to figure the numinous power of Aphrodite in embodied, sculptural form. That aspect inevitably complicates the

gendered power dynamics of looking: for ancient viewers, the subject of the statue was both a woman *and* a god.

In that connection, it is worth remembering just how much Greek myth worried about seeing 'naked' divinities. In his amorous advances, a god like Zeus could take on all manner of different forms: a phallically suggestive swan (for Leda), a bull (for Europa), even a cascade of gold (for Danae). To see a god as 'he really was' could have likewise catastrophic consequences: consider, for example, the story of poor Semele, who was tricked into asking Zeus to appear in full divine majesty, and then promptly blown to smithereens at the sight...

To look upon a goddess – especially a *naked* goddess – could prove no less disastrous. Once again, ancient myth played out the thinking. Particularly pertinent is the story of Actaeon, as most memorably narrated in the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. While out hunting with his dogs, Actaeon is said to have happened upon Artemis as she was taking her bath in a secluded grove. Ovid is at pains to protest the young man's innocence: he had been out hunting with his dogs, he tells us, and was heading home, 'straying with aimless steps'. But Actaeon is not given a moment to explain: splashing Actaeon with spring-water, Artemis embarks upon her revenge – 'now tell, if you can, of having seen me naked!'. Punishment quickly ensues. As Actaeon looks upon his reflection in the water, he witnesses his bodily transformation into a deer – a lengthened neck, dappled back, horns protruding from his forehead. No sooner does Actaeon recognise his transformation than his own hounds also catch sight of him. After a terrible chase, Actaeon meets a particularly grisly end: 'in the deceptive shape of this deer, the master is mangled into mouth-size morsels'...

### Mighty Aphrodite?

Myths like the story of Actaeon make clear the potential *dangers* of looking upon a naked female divinity. Like Artemis, Praxiteles' statue shows Aphrodite at her bath: remember that water-jar at the figure's side. As we have also noted, the statue itself proves rather ambiguous about the permissibility of our gaze: is that right hand a gesture of protestation, or an invitation about where to look? As viewers walked around the statue, looking at it from different angles, answers to that question must have gone around in circles. Indeed, part of the erotic frisson seems to lie in the thought that, just as we see the statue of the goddess, the goddess herself might catch sight of us looking upon her...

That religious backdrop might temper our thinking about the Knidian Aphrodite

as western art's prototypical 'female nude'. At stake is not just the 'male gaze', but also the 'mortal gaze' – the dynamics of looking at a naked goddess. For modern viewers, it can be all too easy to overlook such religious underpinnings. But to understand a statue like the Knidian Aphrodite means grappling with its religious functions, its figuring of a subject that in turn has power over us.

With that in mind, perhaps we might end this article by returning to ancient images of the Actaeon and Artemis myth. In the Roman world, the story was a favourite subject, and nowhere more so than on the painted walls of Pompeii (where over 20 examples are known). Inspect those paintings, however, and we see a telling detail: the figure of the naked Artemis is most often shown in the pose of the Knidian statue, or at least one of her ancient successors. The dangers of looking upon the bathing Artemis are here figured through the lens of Praxiteles' statue: to look upon our naked Aphrodite, it seems, could prove no less catastrophic than looking upon the naked Artemis.

So next time you see a naked Aphrodite or Venus, perhaps it is worth asking yourself: dare you look?

*Michael Squire teaches and publishes on all aspects of classical art. He has written books on Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, The Art of the Body and The Iliad in a Nutshell. He works at King's College London.*